



From : Adam Watson  
Sent : 3 August 2010  
To : Joe Dorward  
Subject : Trees And Red Deer Numbers

Joe

Although there has not been measurement of the ages of all trees in the Caledonian woods, there is obviously and overwhelmingly one age-class, which fits with the Earl's actions. At that time, red deer had been eradicated in Rothiemurchus and Abernethy. This induced a varied age-class of naturally-regenerated trees over large areas. Red deer were introduced from Mar in the 1800s, but the density of deer in the lower woods never rose high enough to prevent natural regeneration. I think this was due partly to a larger human population on the bigger numbers of crofts in the woods, and partly to the woods extending on to the main basin of Strath Spey next to a large population of farmers. This was unlike the topography on Mar, where the woods are in narrow glens and the main valley above Braemar is much higher than Strath Spey and also not a wide alluvial strath with extensive soils suitable for arable cropping.

You are right that the natural situation would be woods with red deer in them. The snag about fencing, as we can see on the south slopes of Creag Bhalg and elsewhere on Mar Lodge Estate, is that deer are driven out. This resulted in no grazing and a rapid development of a thicket and also tall heather already above your knees and at times

your thighs. This is adverse to capercaillie, black grouse, red grouse, mountain hares and much else, and also creates the potential for a severe fire because of unnaturally large build-up of fuel. Of course it also is obtrusive in the landscape and prevents easy access for walkers and skiers. The deer ought to be in the woods, and eating many seedlings, as well as their hooves opening up bare ground that is then a spot for a seedling to establish. I have always thought that the aim should be not to preserve every seedling, but to accept many losses of seedlings, provided that there is a net increase of trees. That increase does not have to be fast, except when political showmanship intervenes.

You ask about when red deer eat seedlings. The answer is mainly in winter snow, when grass and heath are less accessible. Your question about what upper deer density is compatible with tree regeneration is difficult to answer. Again it depends on the topography and altitude and associated climatic factors such as snow. If woods are in vast plains, as in Strath Spey, deer in winter have a larger area of low-altitude sheltered wintering grounds to enter. On Mar Lodge estate, where the woods are fragmented on glen sides and at higher altitude with more snow, the wintering area of sheltered low-altitude ground with less snow is much smaller than in Strath Spey. As a result, the grazing impact is greatest on the very bottom, in spots such as near Derry Lodge. I would expect the first successful tree regeneration to occur there at high altitudes such as the tops of the woods, where grazing impacts have long been lower because of the greater snow-lie and exposure.

I think the Mar Lodge changes have also been affected by massive new fencing and exclusion of red deer for so-called natural tree regeneration on nearby ground, especially on Mar Estate, but also Invercauld and Balmoral. This was paid for by taxpayers through Forestry Commission grants, in full association with SNH and the Deer Commission. For years I have regarded it as a conspicuous failure. I made a formal complaint on it to the DC, and they decided to act on it along with FC and SNH, but all that resulted was interminable meetings and waffling. Staff at high level in these bodies had not thought critically, and had gone with the flow of inter-organisation cooperation, a recipe for lack of responsibility! It was bound to result in deer being displaced, and should have been disallowed on grounds of animal welfare. What a mess!

I told the NTS Mar Lodge Manager about these problems many years ago, but he obviously did not like what I said and did not reply, but just looked at me! I suspect that neighbouring estates would have been informed fully about such big plans, and that NTS had agreed, again without critical thought or foresight.

Adam